

GAMES

FAQ

Q I get various graphical glitches when I play a 3D game. What might the problem be?

A First make sure you have the latest drivers for your graphics card. You can get these directly from ATI (www.ati.com) or Nvidia (www.nvidia.com). Download the correct drivers for your operating system and card and install them.

If a specific game is causing problems, it's worth getting the latest patches for that software. You should be able to download these from the publisher's website. Some patches aren't compatible with existing saved games, however, so be careful if you're in the middle of a game.

If the problem persists, then your graphics card may be overheating. Open your PC case and check that nothing is obstructing the fan, such as an expansion card or wires. Try leaving the side of the case off and see if the increased airflow helps. If it does, you may need to fit a system fan to help expel warm air from the case.

Seth Barton

Notebooks, video and games expert

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UBISOFT Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

★★★★★
£25 inc VAT

Touting itself as a halfway point between the first-person shooter and role-playing genres, Dark Messiah delivers some of the most visceral and brutal action ever seen on the PC. Arkane Studios has used Valve's Source engine, which powered the impressive Half-Life 2, to create a stunning Tolkien-esque fantasy world steeped in beauty, detail and bucketfuls of gore.

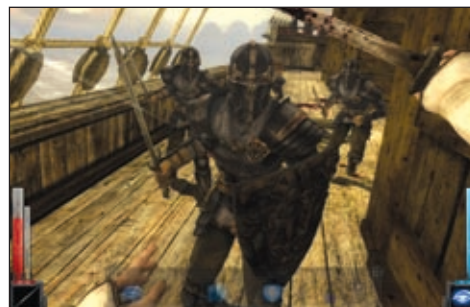
Who you are and what you're doing in this world is barely relevant; what matters is the sheer thrill of Dark Messiah's combat. Several weapons are available, from daggers and longbows to staves and swords, each of which favours a different playing style. While few games manage to convey a proper sense of weighty melee combat from a first-person viewpoint, Dark Messiah seems to have nailed it with ease. Swords connect with sparks and clashes, opponents dodge and parry, and special attacks allow you to swipe heads clean off in a flurry of blood and cinematic slow-motion effects.

The RPG side comes into play through the character development system, in which skill points earned during levels can be spent on skills in certain areas of expertise, helping your character to become a wizard, assassin or warrior. The path of a wizard, for example, features spells such as telekinesis, enabling you to pick up and throw distant objects, and ice, which allows you to freeze enemies and also cover

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent swordfights
- ✓ Relentlessly gory
- ✗ Simplistic level designs

ACTION GAME Requires Windows 2000/XP, 2.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 7GB disk space
PART CODE B000FSQD9Y
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.darkmessiahgame.com



▲ Gore ahoy! That deck is going to need to some serious scrubbing

the ground with ice and cause foes to slip lethally (and comically) into racks of spikes.

Dark Messiah's levels follow a linear path for the most part, but Arkane Studios has designed them in such a way as to aid combat and create a more varied experience. You can break wooden supports to bring barrels toppling down on enemies or kick foes into racks of spikes. Each game presents new ways of bringing death to whatever orc, human or goblin is in your way.

While the ability to lure enemies into these traps is one of the game's greatest strengths, opportunities to do so are often far too clearly signposted. The racks of spikes are abundant enough to detract from their initial appeal, and unnaturally positioned objects such as teetering barrels and chandeliers make it feel as if the game is holding your hand throughout.

Despite the patronising nature of Dark Messiah's level design, it is a fantastic and graphically impressive action adventure with a dash of RPG thrown in for good measure. The gore levels are high, however; the squeamish may want to sit this one out.

Sam Nolan

On the right tracks Interview with Sid Meier

Sid Meier is the creator of such gaming classics as Civilization and Railroad Tycoon. He's finally returned to the subject of trains after a 16-year wait; see our review opposite. Seth Barton talks to him about trains and how the games industry has evolved.



CS Are railways a personal passion, or just something that makes for a good game?

Probably both of those. When I was young, my father and I laid down a lot of track. One year we'd taken over the dining room with our trains and we had to eat somewhere else. When I became a games designer, it seemed like a fun topic for a game.

CS Now that you're returning to Railroads, what were you looking to add, or is it a faithful update?

We were not able to do much visually in those days, so I think the big change from the original game to this game is the incredible visuals that we're able to create.

The cool thing about model trains is watching them go, and we've re-created that with the game.

CS Better graphics generally do mean bigger budgets, but would you agree that this can actually stifle creativity?

It's a concern. The investments are higher and the risks greater in creating games, which might generate a bit of conservatism. But big titles can generate a lot of sales, so it's just a sign of the growth of the industry that budgets and costs have gone up.

CS In contrast to the ongoing controversy of violence in games, many of yours have historical themes and therefore an educational slant to them. Why is this?

We think people enjoy learning – not just sitting in a classroom and being taught, but discovering things on their own. We try to provide opportunities in the games for people to learn something and apply it by developing new technologies or applying new strategies.

CS Do you think the industry suffers at times because there's a lack of spokespeople?

I think it's probably true that we're a young enough industry and the kind of people who go into games design are probably from a programming and gaming background and not as outgoing when speaking as those in the limelight in other industries.

We haven't focused on trying to present a certain image or certain face to the public. I think gamers get it; they know what we're about and understand what we're doing. It's a little harder to convey that message outside of the industry.



▲ All aboard: Sid Meier's Railroads looks like a toy train set, but the business is cut-throat

2K GAMES Sid Meier's Railroads

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT

Modern trains are often criticised for being overcrowded, under-financed and poorly run. However, the mid-19th century was a golden age for railways, a romantic era of technological breakthroughs that revolutionised transport, industry and communications. Sid Meier's Railroads attempts to re-create those heady days of steam with this strategy game.

The basic gameplay involves connecting towns and resources with railway tracks and then devising profitable routes for your steam engines to ply. Choose wisely and cash will come flooding in, increasing your share value. Rival rail barons, either computer-controlled or online opponents, compete to fulfil contracts and outperform you financially. Drop too far behind and you'll find yourself selling shares in your company to stay afloat. The game is over if one of your opponents mounts a successful takeover bid, buying you out and taking control of your network.

The business may be cut-throat, but the graphics are enchanting. It looks more like a gigantic toy railway set than a realistic representation of the period. It's a system hog, though, and only those with powerful graphics cards will get it running smoothly in full detail.

Keeping an eye on everything can be tricky as your network grows, but thankfully there isn't an excess of extra features to look out for. Our main gripe is the lack of any structured campaign mode; there are only seven single-player maps, although many more should be available for free download once the scenario editor is released.

This isn't the most complex or realistic-looking strategy game, but it did stoke our interest in the history of the railways. Hardcore fans of the Tycoon series of games may find it a touch simplistic, but others will love tinkering with this nearly limitless toy train set.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Enchanting graphics
- ✓ Not too complex
- ✗ Needs a proper campaign structure

STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows 2000/XP, 1.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 2GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.2kgames.com



▲ Hopping mad: everyone's favourite mental bunny is back

TELLTALE GAMES Sam & Max Episode 1: Culture Shock

★★★★★

\$8.95 (around £4.50)

When LucasArts pulled production of its second Sam & Max game, it was a wasted opportunity. Fortunately, the developers thought so too and set up their own company with the intention of releasing a series of Sam & Max games for just a few pounds per episode. Culture Shock is the first in the series.

It's a surprisingly slick affair; the canine freelance police detective and his psychotic rabbit friend are brought to life with bright, cheerful graphics. It's as good as anything to come out of LucasArts, and the voice acting is spot on. Purists may moan about the change of voice talent from the original PC game, but you'll soon be so engrossed you won't notice.

A big part of Sam & Max is the humour, and Telltale Games has got it exactly right. If you like Sam & Max, you'll love this. The plot involves faded child stars and a megalomaniac intent on hypnotising the world; it's bizarre and strange, but certainly inventive. There are touches of brilliance in there, too, particularly the scene where you travel into Sam's psyche to get admitted into a mental asylum – trust us, it makes sense in the game. Throw in a bit of child-star beating, rat torturing and shooting at innocent drivers' taillights before busting them for traffic infringements, and it's everything you'd expect from Sam & Max.

The interface is superb, and you can solve all the problems using only the mouse. However, the episodic format makes the game almost too simple; the limited locations mean you never have to stray far to find the answer to a particular problem. We managed to make our way through the entire game in less than two hours. It's fun, but it's too easy and it left us wanting a full-length adventure.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent graphics and acting
- ✓ Easy to play
- ✗ Over too quickly

POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 512MB RAM, 230MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.telltalegames.com
DETAILS www.telltalegames.com



▲ The dervishes in Nightfall can be tricky but they are rewarding for the experienced player

NCSOFT Guild Wars: Nightfall

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT

Nightfall, the second expansion for online RPG Guild Wars, follows the pattern of its predecessors by giving you the option of either following the lengthy campaign (alone or cooperatively with another player) or creating a top-level hero for player-versus-player battles.

The 20 new campaign missions alter the world around you as the plot develops, and this sets Guild Wars apart from other online games, making single-player games not just possible but enjoyable. The game begins in a new area of the Guild Wars world, with interesting Asian and African architecture and two new character classes. The first of these is the dervish, a whirling bladed ally with a nasty speciality in area-of-affect attacks. With skills based on combining enchantments to make for more potent strikes, the dervish can be tricky to manage but rewarding for the experienced player. The Paragon uses long-range attacks and has spells to enhance his ally's abilities while trying to avoid close contact.

Nightfall also introduces heroes as the plot progresses. These are perfect for the solo player and are essentially controllable henchmen who also feature in the storyline. You can control the progress of your heroes as they level up, pick their attributes, skills and secondary professions and so on. It's sometimes hard to control the heroes and your main character in a heated battle, but they are helpful in most missions.

While most online RPGs charge you a monthly fee to play, Guild Wars has always been free after the purchase of the game. This expansion pack remains free to play online. With no monthly fees, a fabulous Arabian Nights plot and intriguing new classes and henchmen, Nightfall has cemented Guild Wars' reputation as the best and most accessible cooperative RPG around.

Evan Knowles

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent new classes and heroes
- ✓ Wonderfully designed location
- ✗ Heroes are difficult to control

ONLINE RPG Requires Windows 98 or later, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 500MB disk space
PART CODE B000HK567K
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.guildwars.com